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ENZI PAYS TRIBUTE TO SEN. COBURN, HAILS PASSAGE OF GENETIC NON-DISCRIMINATION BILL; PROVIDES GUIDANCE ON DISCLOSURE TO HEALTH INSURERS, EMPLOYERS

Washington, D.C. - U.S. Senator Mike Enzi, R-WY, Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP Committee), today hailed passage of the "Genetic Nondiscrimination Act of 2005," a bill to prohibit discrimination in health insurance and employment, and praised U.S. Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) for his work to ensure that the bill's protections extend to children if discrimination occurs based on prenatal testing.

"I am pleased to see this important bill passed unanimously by the Senate," Enzi said. "Senator Coburn's insight and dedication as a physician have helped ensure that the protections intended by the authors of this bill do not unintentionally leave children or their families at risk to denial of health insurance, based upon genetic information uncovered through prenatal testing."

"This bill is an important step in preventative medicine that will save lives and save health care costs down the road. Providing protection against the misuse of genetic information will encourage the development of science that can improve the health of generations to come," he added.

As passed by the Senate, S.306 will establish clear guidance for health insurers and employers, as well as consumers about the use and disclosure of genetic information. Over half of the states currently have laws governing genetic information. However, they differ in terms of how genetic information is handled and used by insurers and employers. Enzi said both employers and insurers will be better served if federal law establishes clear and consistent rules regarding the disclosure and use of genetic information, as required under S.306.

"Advances in genetic science are transforming our fight against deadly inherited diseases. But fear of discrimination by health insurers and employers on the basis of predictive genetic information can deter individuals from taking advantage of these life-saving genetic tests and therapies," Enzi said.

"Questions about the current scope of genetic information protection invite, not discourage, litigation," Enzi added. "We are far better off setting clear, consistent rules now, rather than allowing courts to set them piecemeal through litigation. The time to save lives is now. The time to save future health care costs is now."

By fully protecting the privacy of genetic information and encouraging individuals to take full advantage of genetic screening, counseling and testing, new therapies will be developed, Enzi predicted.